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Abstract

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The research investigated the relationship between the migration process and Catholic women's practice of religion and rearing their children in that religion in their new homeland. It sought to identify the importance of cultural factors affecting their experience of religious events by comparing the meaning of one significant religious celebration - first holy communion - in their original homeland and in Australia.

So far as could be ascertained, this was the first research done on the first communion experience.



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UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

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Women's Religious
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Norma Claire Onley

Occasional Paper No. 17

**MIGRATION AND
WOMEN'S RELIGIOUS
EXPERIENCE**

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Occasional Paper Series No. 17, December 1989
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This paper is based on research undertaken for a thesis prepared as partial requirement for an M.A. (Hons) degree at the Centre for Multicultural Studies at the University of Wollongong (Onley, Norma 1988, 'Women: Migration, Culture and Religious Experience').

The research investigated the relationship between the migration process and Catholic women's practice of religion and rearing their children in that religion in their new homeland. It sought to identify the importance of cultural factors affecting their experience of religious events by comparing the meaning of one significant religious celebration – first holy communion – in their original homeland and in Australia.

So far as could be ascertained, this was the first research done on the first communion experience.

Background

My initial interest in the area of immigrant women's religious experience in a new homeland, arose from a general concern for women and their families, and especially from my parish experience among women from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds. Many of the women had spoken of their concern about rearing children according to their religious beliefs in today's society.

Religion is viewed herein as culturally acquired. 'Culture' is considered holistically as a people's total way of life wherein religion relates to integrative needs and the human search for meaning and purpose in life and creation (e.g. Hally, C. 1986). The specific religious institution and faith referred to is the Catholic Church.

Before the post World War II immigration influx, the Catholic Church in Australia was composed, for the most part, of persons of Anglo-Celtic background. However, the Catholic Church in Australia belongs within the Catholic Church world-wide, and today, as a result of immigration, it reflects the cultural and ethnic diversity of the whole Church. Indeed, the Church in Australia is even more ethnically diversified than is the general population. At the 1981 census, 20.6 per cent of the general population

was overseas-born, whereas for the Catholic population the figure was 23.9 per cent. Moreover, in most capital cities the Catholic population exceeded the national average, e.g. Sydney, 28.2 per cent, Melbourne, 33.4 per cent (Pittarello, A 1987: 7-10). Hence, events such as first communion may evoke various responses according to the different expectations and customs of the diverse ethnic groups concerned, including those of the Anglophone, Australian-born group.

To date, the Church in Australia generally has continued in its established structures and traditions which met the needs of its former, predominantly mono-cultural, Anglophone membership. To what extent are these structures and traditions appropriate in view of the extraordinary heterogeneity of the Church in Australia today?

Throughout history the Catholic Church has responded to the pastoral needs of migrant and itinerant peoples. Current Roman directives (Rome, 1978) state that the parish is responsible for the pastoral care of immigrants - none of whom is ever an 'outsider' - and it must become 'still more of a community' as it reaches out to minister to its people. In the light of these guidelines, the case studies investigated women's experiences, particularly of Mass and first communion for their children.

The Mass (the Eucharist) is the Church's central act of worship, the sign of, and means to, unity (Constitution of the Sacred Liturgy n. 2). Since first communion is a person's initial participation in the Mass and is a step in the rites of initiation into the faith-community, it has significant personal and communal importance. Therefore, the research referred to in this paper dealt with practical matters in Catholic life at the parish level.

Approaches to First Communion

Throughout the world the Church has the same basic beliefs, hierarchic authority structure and sacramental systems. Before the renewal initiated by the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), the emphasis was on uniformity rather than today's approach of unity in diversity.

Since early this century the custom has been for children to receive first communion around age seven. At a special Mass they sit together, dressed in white, at the front of a decorated church, then celebrated together at a party afterwards.

The Council reasserted that all sacraments are ecclesial celebrations, not private devotions (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy n. 26), so the official view now is that while first communion is a significant step in the child's initiation into the Church, it is primarily a parish celebration. Accordingly, in parishes such as that encountered, parents are expected to present their child for first communion during a regular Sunday Mass because this is seen as the context wherein the child has to live its faith today. This is also a sign of the parents' responsibility for the child's religious education.

The communions observed took place during six regular Sunday masses spread over three consecutive weeks.

Description of the Case Studies

The case studies involved five women of Lebanese and one of Syrian background who had experienced their own first communion in their original homeland and a comparable group of Anglophone, Australian-born women whose children were experiencing the same sacramental programme in a Catholic parish school.

Some aspects of the backgrounds of the two groups are compared below:

All but one of the immigrant women had migrated to Australia in their late teens soon after finishing school, and since their arrival had attained either a good, or a fluent, command of English. Their average length of residence in the parish was just over ten years - slightly more than that of the Australian-born.

The average age of the overseas-born women was almost seven years younger than that of the Australian-born, and they had had their first child at a comparably younger age. At the time of the interviews most had four children whereas the majority of the Australian-born had three.

Although the educational systems were different, overall, the women from both groups had approximately similar educational backgrounds - either full secondary education or some years of secondary schooling.

Differences were found in the socio-religious backgrounds. The overseas-born women all claimed to have lived in mono-religious communities whether urban ('a Catholic town'), or rural village (on religiously defined communities in Lebanon, see Drury, S. 1981:38; Hassan R. et al 1985:173 - 4; Ata, A. 1988:270). On the other hand, all

the Australian-born were from urban communities of diverse religions. Since half of these women had only one Catholic parent, both their family and the general society were religiously diversified. This appeared to be the greatest difference between the two early backgrounds.

Brief biographical outlines of both the overseas-born women (pseudonyms beginning with 'M') and the Australian-born (pseudonyms beginning with 'A') will expand this a little further. The overseas-born women were Eastern rite Catholics, mainly the Maronite rite. 'Rites' involve ancient liturgies, spiritualities and customs expressing the Catholic faith. The Latin rite is dominant in the West, but a number of rites exist in the East.

- Marietta had several years of secondary education before emigrating to Australia at the age of seventeen in the early 1970s. She spent some time as a factory worker in her city of arrival before moving to Sydney where she had similar employment until she married and had children. In her original homeland Marietta had attended daily Mass, but now, with small children, she attended only on feastdays. She preferred the Maronite Mass because 'It's done the old way... I feel that church is still a holy place.'

- Margaret gained her baccalaureat, then emigrated in the mid - 1970s aged about nineteen. She married and had her family in Australia. Now fluent in English, Margaret was employed in domestic work. She regularly attended the parish Mass which she preferred because her children understood it better, and moreover, she felt more comfortable with the Australian priests.

- Monica came from a large 'Catholic town'. Having completed secondary school, she married in Lebanon at seventeen and emigrated to Australia in the 1970s. On arrival she, too, worked in a factory for a short time. In addition to her wife and mother roles, Monica assisted her husband in his business. Fluent in English, Monica felt comfortable at both the parish and Maronite Masses.

- Miriam gained her baccalaureat, then emigrated at seventeen in the late 1970s. She was employed in an inner-city factory until her marriage, thereafter fulfilling the roles of wife and mother. Now established in her new homeland, and fluent in English, Miriam regularly attended the local parish church from choice and also because her children did not understand Arabic.

- Martha had some years' secondary school, married at eighteen in Lebanon and then migrated to Australia in the late 1970s. Over the years Martha had been employed outside the home on a part-time basis in domestic type work. She had attained reasonably good English. For regular Sunday worship Martha oscillated between the local parish and the Maronite Mass, but preferred the latter because in the parish 'they speak too quickly and I can't keep up'.

- Maria gained her baccalaureat. In her original homeland she had worked in the fields, married at eighteen and raised her children to school age before the family unit migrated to Australia in the late 1980s. Only two years in this country at the time of the interview, Maria as yet spoke no English. She regularly attended one of the Maronite Masses and maintained contact with the Maronite priests who 'understand my tradition and I'm not embarrassed by it'. Nevertheless, Maria attended school Masses where 'I still pray in Arabic, but to myself'.

- Aileen grew up in a 'close, loving family', gained her H.S.C. and took up a clerical position. She had taken an extended overseas trip. Since marrying and having children, she had continued working intermittently. Aileen had given up receiving the sacraments for a number of years but had resumed several years before the interview. She felt very much part of the faith-community and participated in the parish. Though not a Catholic, her husband was very supportive and co-operated fully concerning the children's Catholic upbringing.

- Agnes completed secondary school and took up clerical work. One of her parents was an atheist, the other a devout Catholic. She had made two extended overseas trips before marrying and having children. For about ten years Agnes had given up her religious practice but returned to it for her children's sake. She now appreciated the Church's renewal, particularly the Rite of Reconciliation which she found 'very impressive'.

- Annette was educated to the Leaving Certificate and became a teacher. She continued working part-time after she was married and had a family. She was actively involved in the parish.

- Alexis had left school after the Intermediate Certificate, and had worked in an office for many years. She too, had had an extended overseas trip. After her marriage she had continued working until her first child was born.

- Amy had four years of secondary schooling, and trained as a nurse. Since marrying and having a family she had taken up clerical work. Amy's parents were both devoutly religious - one Catholic, the other Protestant. Amy participated in school and parish activities.

- Anna had finished year 10 and taken up clerical work. She also, had had only one Catholic parent. Anna had given up religious practice for a few years and was still not a regular church-goer, although she 'believes in the Catholic religion'.

Data for the case studies was collected by means of indepth personal interviews based on a written questionnaire. Selected key informants from the parish team and school staff were interviewed also. Half were men and half were women. They included: the school principal, relevant teachers and liaison persons, the parish priest and members of the parish team whose work was mainly with young people of migrant background and Catholic children in state schools, a great number of whom were of migrant background.

To gain as complete a picture as possible of the event, the researcher observed all relevant meetings with parents, the classroom preparation and also was a participant-observer at all related sacramental celebrations.

Immigrant Women

The main areas addressed by social scientists concerning migrant women, have generally concerned the socio-economic aspects of migration. They show that the greatest burden is borne by non-Anglophone women from close-knit, pre-industrial societies who, for financial reasons, have to join the unskilled workforce in modern, industrial countries like Australia. The double function of co-provider plus traditional wife-mother roles can exacerbate the stress of marital and inter-generational conflicts due to cultural dissonance. In addition, they often suffer exploitation and sexual harassment in the workplace (e.g. Bottomley, G. 1984; Huber, R. 1985; Storer, D. 1985; Dexter, J. 1987).

Religious issues have received far less attention. To date, the only survey on migrant women's religious needs and expectations in Australia, 'Transition or Regression?', was prepared by Patricia Ravalico for the First National Convention on Pastoral Care in Multicultural Australia held in Melbourne in 1987 sponsored by the Scalabrinian Fathers. Ravalico's main finding was that women identified with the Catholic Church

here, but they missed the public religious celebrations of their original homelands which she linked to their opinion that Australia was a 'less good' place in which to rear children religiously.

"Multicultural Australia"

The cultural and ethnic plurality which is characteristic of Australian society today, resulted from the immigration programme established after World War II to meet the needs of development and defence. The changes and developments regarding recruitment, official policy and measures taken to remove or alleviate migrant disadvantage show that the resulting heterogeneous population was quite unplanned (e.g. Jupp, J. et al. 1986).

Another view is given by studies which link post-war migration to the internationalization of industrial capitalism and the consequent internationalization of labour, and claims that Australian labour requirements overrode the original plan for 'assimilable' migrants (e.g. Collins, J. 1984).

The cultural diversity that migration brought makes claims on all institutions. To date, research and knowledge about how to service this diversity is patchy and uneven. Settlement policy has moved from one of assimilation, to integration, to multiculturalism.

Originally, 'multicultural Australia' was linked with equal rights for all under the Labor Government of 1973 (Jupp, J. et al. 1986). The term was accepted by later Liberal Governments, but with a subtle change in meaning. Complexity and confusion have surrounded the concept of 'multiculturalism' due largely to two meanings and two approaches to it, and because they are often intermingled (Castles, S. 1987). For those who take the culturalist approach, 'multiculturalism' is an 'ideology of society' used to uphold cultural identities within a cohesive society (e.g. Zubrzycki, J. 1982; Smolicz, J. 1980). Others who take 'multiculturalism' as a 'principle of socio-economic policy', hold that migrant disadvantage is rooted in socio-economic structures and offer alternative views on immigration programmes and policies (e.g. Collins, J. 1984; Jakubowicz, A. 1984; Castles, S. 1987).

Official policy first took up the culturalist approach and, more recently, an approach that expects access and equity within mainstream institutions. Confusion, however, persists. This puts considerable pressure on those attempting to interpret social policy

and to service the diverse peoples of their constituencies. Officially, all Australians are 'ethnic' (Zubrzycki, J. 1982), but in common parlance the term usually denotes those of non-Anglophone background.

Some Effects of Ethnic Diversification on the Church

Confusion has also existed among church people (e.g. Faulkner, A. 1980). Generally, the Churches followed prevailing government policies regarding immigrants and originally concentrated on humanitarian and settlement needs (Hally, C. 1980a; Faulkner, A. 1980). In 1947 the Catholic Church provided for migrant chaplains to minister to adult migrants, whereas children were expected to be assimilated through the parish and school systems. The status and role of migrant chaplains have not been reassessed, although this has been recommended (e.g. O'Leary, H. 1971; Murphy, J. 1987).

As well as having linguistic and cultural diversity, the Catholic Church in Australia now has a diversity of rites. In a previously largely mono-cultural, Latin rite church, the Eastern rites were either unknown or something of a mystery to the great majority of Australian Catholics. Annette recounted how she felt on learning of their existence:

- 'I was thirty before I learned of the existence of other rites in the Church.' With some feeling, she continued: 'I felt betrayed and that I had been wrongly taught. I was shocked to find such variations in the Church.' Annette had since developed an appreciation of the beauty of the rituals she had seen occasionally at other language Masses.

Although designed originally for Latin rite children of Anglo-Irish background, today, Catholic schools reflect the diversity of the general population. But Catholic schools have been slow to understand and provide for children of the Eastern rites (Cahill, D. 1987). Moreover, many Orthodox, Islamic and Buddhist parents, dissatisfied with the values and discipline in the government system, want their children educated in the Catholic schools (Cahill, D. 1987). The cultural, linguistic and religious diversity, plus the rapid numerical increase, has put great stress on the Catholic educational system.

Although cultural plurality is a feature of the whole Church, this reality was remote for most Australian Catholics until the immigration influx brought 'the world' into the local parish. Case study evidence showed that reactions varied. This became evident, for example, in the responses to whether the women approved of the occasional use of

languages other than English at Sunday Masses for scripture readings, prayers, or hymns. Responses were evenly divided, for and against, and firmly given, as for example:

- 'Yes, others have a right to hear their own language', commented Agnes, 'but there are so many cultures, a rotation system would be necessary'.
- 'Yes', agreed Aileen, 'but it would be hard to implement. Old parishioners would find it hard to accept; they are very set in their ways'.
- 'No', replied Alexis, 'I feel it is my Mass and my language! Italians, Poles or whoever, can go to their own language Mass'.
- 'No. English is the language in Australia', explained Anna 'If we went overseas, we'd have to learn their language, so, people who come here should learn English'.

In view of the cultural and ethnic diversification of their congregations today, some church people see that the Churches now face challenges not only in pastoral ministry, but also to their traditional structures, training programmes and church services (Pittarello, A. 1987; Smolicz, J. 1987; Cox, D. 1986; Houston, J. 1986).

A positive attitude to living among diverse cultures was seen in the evidence that many of the women from both groups had strong desires for Christian community. They hoped, particularly, that their children would benefit from the experience of diverse cultures, that they would grow in tolerance towards others and be enriched religiously from the different Catholic traditions now found in the local parish and school membership. Significantly, the recent-arrival hoped that her children would be able to live peacefully. An Australian born mother told how her eight-year old child was annoyed that her family could speak only English, and was keen to learn a second language.

The question arises: Will the church in Australia provide 'services' for its 'ethnic groups' (e.g. migrant chaplains), or plan and work together as a 'diversified whole' for a common future together based on their common faith and values?

Previously, with people of predominantly the same language, customs and symbols, there were more or less common understandings of Catholic religious values and

celebrations. Today, with the Church's extraordinary plurality, it cannot be presumed that all understandings and expectations are the same just from being 'Catholic' - the expression of the common faith is always culturally and historically specific. Moreover, the whole range of social, educational and faith-development variations add further complexities to the range of religious expression found among Catholics. Since officially, the Church sees herself as a sign and means of achieving unity among all peoples (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 1), and now the diversity of the whole Church is found in the Church in Australia, it can be argued that the Church here is in a special position and is challenged to witness to its professed inner reality of unity in diversity (e.g. Hally, C. 1980b).

In view of all this there seems need for Australia's Catholics from different backgrounds to come together to share their insights and understandings of the essential elements of that faith. That is, not to presume there is agreement, but to identify the shared 'common core' of faith beneath the variety of cultural expressions of it, then, from that basis of unity, to proceed together to build a common future as Church. (This is an adaptation of the educational technique developed by Kalantzis and Cope in their research, e.g. 1980: 38 - 39.)

Some such process would be necessary also for any real adaptation/change in liturgical celebrations, church structures or customs to make them more appropriate to the Church's changed and diversified composition. However, it would take time, and require creative leadership, research, and planning. Although a daunting task for such a complex institution, it does seem necessary.

The diversification of the Catholic population has not been reflected in clerical and religious personnel, a situation which has been seen as both contributing to, and being caused by, the inflexibility of Church leadership and institutions to accommodate the new diversity (Hally, C. 1980a; Smolicz, J. 1987). Criticisms of the Church's response to migrants have been that the Church was 'more Australian than Catholic' because 'culture divides more than religion unites' (Lewins, F. 1978). Another argued that the cultural expression of religion differs, so that 'religion unites, culture diversifies' (Pittarello, A. 1980). Others have asserted that Anglophone Australians need to develop a more positive approach to newcomers (O'Leary, H. 1971; Cheli, G. 1987), and that the Church here urgently needs a new self-image and vision for the future (Hally, C. 1983; Pittarello, A. 1987; Cheli, G. 1987).

To the present, the Catholic Church in Australia continues in its established traditions. Migrant chaplains minister to their language groups in designated parish churches. From the evidence, many migrants oscillate between parish and chaplaincy, while others opt for one or the other if they do maintain their practice. Great efforts are made by some parish personnel (such as those encountered) to build a 'Christian community' among the various ethnic groups with a view to greater religious participation in the future. Such efforts depend on the initiative and resources of the local clergy for whom the urgency of pastoral ministry often leaves little time or energy for the study of, and planning to meet the challenges of, cultural diversity in the parish. Moreover, if personnel change, so may the approach in the parish.

Migration and Women's Religious Practice

The evidence showed that women with a strong tradition of family devotions maintained them. The great majority of these women also continued regular Sunday worship (Mass) which retained its intrinsic value for them despite its being a culturally different experience in Australia. Elements identified as important for religious celebrations in the original homeland depicted a Christian community celebrating a shared faith and identity. They asserted that there 'the feeling was different', or as one put it, 'the flavour was different', while another described the emotions evoked by such celebrations on feast days as 'overwhelming'.

Yet the women identified themselves as Catholic, and when speaking of attending Mass in a multi-ethnic congregation, often referred to basic faith values beyond cultural differences, although they did feel the differences (similarly, see Pittarello, A. 1980 and Ravalico, P. 1987). For example, speaking of the significance of Communion in her life now, Miriam commented: 'This is where traditions don't count so much. The Eucharist is the Eucharist'.

Since the same percentage of Australian-born women were active in parish groups as was the case for the overseas-born in their original homeland, it would appear that until adequate inter-personal relationships are established, migrant women will remain uninvolved in local parish activities. But the development of these relationships could be a slow and complex process. One woman's story illustrated this point:

- Amy definitely felt that she worked much harder than the migrants did to establish relationships. 'It's very difficult to get them to join in ... I've phoned, called in, tried everything!... Last year two Lebanese joined a programme. I was thrilled! A

few Australian-born migrants (sic!) have joined the P & F, but the first generation are hard to get... This parish makes great efforts... Many people are bending over backwards to make others welcome, but headway is slow'.

- Another viewpoint on participation in parish activities came from a key informant who considered that the liturgy (Mass) did not address the 'multi-cultural' nature of the parish; that ways had not yet been found to encourage and support migrants' participation; that everyone's philosophy had to become 'multi-cultural' before any real effect would be seen.

Contact with priests was rare in both groups. Evidence showed that for migrant women who are well-established and fluent in English, there was no great difference in their attitude to, or contact with, Australian priests, compared with those of the Australian-born women.

Migration and Rearing Children Religiously

The immigrant women identified the socio-religious environment in Australia as the greatest challenge to rearing children in their religion. They had migrated from cohesive mono-religious communities where religion was integrated with daily living and adults felt responsible for good example to the young, to an impersonal, multi-faith or 'secular' society where religion was seen as a private matter. Therefore, here they relied even more on their family and looked to their ethnic group for support in rearing children. Traditional means of transmitting the faith by family customs and example were maintained. (They spoke of family prayer, of religious stories and songs passed from one generation to the next.) Their children attended Catholic schools. Even so, their general aspirations for their children's future resembled those of the Australian-born mothers, as did the perceived difficulties in rearing children in a permissive society. The women of both groups found the general social environment unhelpful for rearing children religiously, which would agree with Ravalico's finding that immigrant women found Australia 'less good' than their homelands in that regard.

The Mothers' Experience of First Communion

Considering that the pre-Vatican Church emphasised uniformity and the sacramental system was the same, it was not surprising that, despite different cultures and rites, there was much similarity between the overseas and Australian experiences of first communion: all had been prepared at school and almost all had Sister-teachers. Their

memory was of wearing long white dresses and veils, of processing together with their classmates into a specially decorated church and sitting together up the front for Mass. Then they celebrated at a party afterwards.

The overseas experience was well-remembered by all but one. Behind each vivid memory was a strong emotional experience, for example of feeling 'excited', 'special', or 'important'.

- Miriam described how the whole village celebrated first communion which was 'so important'. She vividly recalled wearing white and walking in procession with the others from the school along a cobbled road to the church, strewing flowers along the way. She had felt 'so special'. The children sat together at the front of the church and their parents took them up for communion. The whole village celebrated at the party afterwards. She commented that first communion is the child's first experience of the Catholic faith since it was too tiny to celebrate its baptism.

- Marietta claimed to remember the event clearly, and became quite emotional as she described how the Bishop was waiting with open arms before the altar to greet the children as they processed into the church. Everything was 'very special' for her: 'I wish they would have that now. I feel it has no special feeling for the child now'.

- Martha also had vivid memories. She became very animated when speaking about the event and commented often: 'It was so very beautiful!' Describing her feeling then she said: 'I felt as though I was a different person - more Catholic'.

- Maria's recollections were clear. Again, the whole village was present. 'I remember it with real happiness'. For her, it was a day when she became 'a real part of the Church'.

- Monica had anticipated wearing the long white dress, and during the preparatory period was concerned 'to get everything right' for the event. It was an important day and 'something you don't forget for your whole life'.

- Margaret's memories were few, and recounted without special feeling. She did remember 'that long white dress' which had been specially made. Her mother kept it and loaned it out to others.

Among the Australian-born, half had clear memories, the rest very few:

- Alexis remembered the occasion vividly as: 'One of the best days of my life! It was lovely! It was my day, one that I had waited a long time for', She described a procession and Mass similar to that of the overseas born women. The whole day had been one of 'exhilaration'.
- Aileen also had clear recollections. Although she was very young - only six - she particularly remembered how beautiful everything was, and how she felt 'different' to the other girls. Her dress was a special one, handed down in the family, but its venerable qualities were lost on her because it was yellowish, not white like the others. Also, she had no mother (her mother had died some time before), whereas all the other girls had their mothers with them.
- Annette, on the other hand, had memories of 'dressing up', and walking down the aisle feeling 'important'. The memory was of the party because parties were very rare in her childhood.
- Agnes had few memories, mainly of being 'terrified of doing the wrong thing'. For her the day itself was not significant, but she has gained an understanding of the importance of communion in her life through on-going Catholic education.
- The other two women had almost no recollections beyond, for one, 'the holiness and fervency of it', and for the other, of having a photo taken.

The women's views on the doctrinal and personal aspects of the sacrament were also similar. But the two socio-religious environments were different, and this, it is argued, contributed to how well or how poorly the experience was remembered and also influenced the women's attitudes to their child's experience.

On the evidence, it can be argued that in cohesive, mono-religious communities where religion was an identifying factor, first communion was celebrated by the whole community rejoicing in welcoming new members to 'its communion'. It was seen as an important day for the child who became fully-bonded to the community. Therefore, the community supported the child and its parents in celebrating the day as well as possible so that the child would remember it. It was a religious rite of passage. The child felt it belonged and was valued in the community and felt great happiness in that

affirmation. The combination of familial and communal support, plus the strong emotions evoked, ensured that the child remembered.

On the other hand, in a multi-faith, or 'secular' society, religious belief and practice were private matters. Parents of first communicants might or might not both be Catholic, and if so, 'practising' ones. Hence the familial as well as the general community could be religiously diversified. Mass and communion were revered as sacred events for which one prepared devoutly - a more personal approach. Children celebrated with their families but not with the community at large.

Although the childhood experiences of both groups of women were similar in appearance, there were socio-religious differences at the familial and communal levels which, apparently, affected the emotional impact. The first experience was well-remembered, the second less so. The evidence suggests that for the event to be memorable for the child, it needs to be thoroughly joyous and rich in audio-visual aspects (e.g. singing, decorations, special clothes). The child needs to be involved (strewing flowers was vividly recalled) and to feel valued by, and important to, both its family and the faith-community.

The Experience of First Communion in Australia

The women's own experiences of first communion were of what they called 'the old way' - one group at a special Mass. Their child's communion took place in different circumstances - at one of a number of designated regular Sunday Masses. There are many factors to consider in making sacramental celebrations more relevant in today's world. An anecdote from an Australian-born mother illustrated some of the problems that can arise. She told her story to show that although she had sound reasons for rejecting 'the new way', she still firmly believed that it was 'the only way for children in today's world'.

- Some years previously an older child was to make her first communion at a certain Mass together with several of her classmates. 'But everything went wrong'. In white dresses and veils the girls sat together with their families at the front of the church in full view of the priest. However, he made no reference to their presence, and moreover, preached on the evils of divorce! To make matters worse, all her Protestant relations had turned up for the occasion. 'Absolutely furious!' she had gone to the parish priest (he was not the one who had celebrated Mass) and complained vigorously.

He was very understanding and arranged to offer a home Mass for her and her friends. The girls wore their white dresses and had a good experience the second time round.

The interviews showed that the overseas and Australian-born mothers shared beliefs and expectations concerning their children's first communion, but differed widely on how it should be celebrated.

After the event, all but one of the immigrant mothers wanted 'the old style' of celebration in future. One was happy with the changes before the event and remained so after it. That the others retained or reverted to preferring the style of their own experience could be (a) because they perceived that as fulfilling better the personal and communal aspects of the sacrament, or (b) as a result of the migration experience. In the second case it could be that since their arrival in Australia their involvement had been mainly with their own kin, so they experienced a 'cultural freeze' whereby the homeland experience was enhanced over time and appeared more desirable. Also, viewed against their memories of a general community celebration, the current dispersion of first communions over several weeks and separate Masses could appear much less impressive.

On the other hand, there was a great diversity of attitudes among the Australian-born mothers ranging from one who wanted 'no extra fuss', through acceptance of or enthusiasm for the new way, to a strong preference for the old. One woman was totally converted to the new style: 'It was far better than anticipated! A wonderful experience!' These varied responses reflected the 'rapid and radical' changes in modern society, the changes in the Church and reactions to them since the Council (e.g. Collins, P. 1986), and the lessened cohesion among Catholics in Australia noted by Leavey (1980). In addition, for some, their expectations were less dependent on vivid memories and strong emotions.

The Importance of Cultural Factors

It is clear that the importance of cultural factors in religious events lies in the affective area, that of emotive impact. Across two countries and rites, the symbols and rituals were basically the same, but the atmosphere and impact in the more cohesive, mono-religious society seemed to cause the event to be remembered much more clearly and to be recounted with greater emotion long afterwards. Cultural factors, being so emotive, can easily override basic agreement and need to be addressed lest they foment divisiveness in a situation of cultural diversity.

It needs to be noted that the women interviewed valued their faith and, for the migrant group, religion was a strong cultural identifier. Information received showed that many migrants and Anglophone Australians have only a tenuous link with the Church, but that they do attend significant occasions such as first communion. This situation offers a wide field for research and study including issues of evangelization, catechesis and pastoral ministry.

Some Implications for Future Practice

Since the Church sees communion as both a sign and cause of unity (e.g. *Lumen Gentium*, n. 7), a celebration of first communion should be a significant event, particularly in a culturally-diversified parish. In trying to achieve this, the Church faces many challenges and each requires considerable study and research. For example:

- a) Since sacraments are ecclesial celebrations, this implies Christian community based on meaningful relationships. Will this community be envisaged across ethnic groups, or within each, while working for unity in plurality?
- b) Effective communication skills are more necessary than ever today for pastoral ministry and are more complex because of language and cultural 'barriers'. Alternatives to group 'talks' are needed, especially for non-Anglophone persons in sacramental programmes.
- c) Together with the desire for greater Christian community there was evidence of preconceptions about other ethnic groups. Some structure seems needed whereby people could meet to share and explain their traditions and ideas and so lessen prejudice and misunderstanding while promoting good relations and enrichment.
- d) Parental involvement in sacramental programmes logically leads to wider lay ministries, hence the need for on-going adult education in the faith. Cultural diversity makes this more difficult to plan and implement, but paradoxically, makes it more imperative.
- e) The liturgy needs to be more appropriate to people of diverse cultures, but change should only come after thorough research and consultation over time.

f) Beneath cultural differences the women agreed on basic human and faith values and expressed common hopes for their children's future. Further study is needed into the rich resources and potential of the Church's female members of all backgrounds, many of whom are effectively restricted by their traditions.

In Conclusion

The issues raised above in relation to one significant religious event illustrate some specific aspects of the reality of cultural and ethnic diversity in the Catholic Church in Australia today. The Church needs to take seriously the ramifications of that diversity, for these touch every aspect of the Church's life and will affect the orientation of all its activities. It will devolve on the leadership to bring diverse peoples together and lead them to share and negotiate if any sort of common future is to evolve. That future will depend in large measure on what is or is not done today.

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